



Challenging the Feminine Mystique in Charlotte Bronte: A Study of *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract— Since ages, the ideal of beauty has been deeply ingrained in women. They have come to internalize the ideology which terms beauty as the foremost virtue in women. Charlotte Bronte in her famous novel, *Jane Eyre*, has not presented Jane as a gorgeous woman exuding charm and beauty in her looks. Rather, by showing Jane's individualism and her capacity to see life from her own perspective, Bronte has empowered her heroine to value freedom and independence in the most unfavourable circumstances.

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Charlotte Bronte's eponymous novel *Jane Eyre* is a fascinating saga of the endearing orphan, Jane who overcomes diverse challenges in her complicated life. The distinguishing feature that lends the novel its popularity is the character of Jane who does not fit into the frame of the usual Victorian heroines. Unlike popular heroines of her times, Jane is not presented as a gorgeous woman exuding charm and beauty in her looks. By showing Jane's individualism and her capacity to see life from her own perspective, Bronte empowers her heroine to value freedom and independence in the most unfavourable circumstances, which is a truly feminist point of view ahead of its times. Moreover, the moral and spiritual development of Jane is presented through a strong internal consciousness and a very powerful first person narration. Bronte was the first woman novelist who explored the psychological depths of her character's personality and prepared the ground for the psychological novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Since ages, the ideal of beauty has been deeply ingrained in women. They have come to internalize the ideology which terms beauty as the foremost virtue in women. Along with culture, literature has played a key role in transferring this idea from one generation to another. In literature, beginning from fairy tales to popular novels, heroines are shown as typically beautiful and virtuous. This leads the reader to establish an inherent connection between the two. There is "a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil" (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 718).

These stereotypical heroines give the readers an impression of how indispensable beauty is for the fairer sex. Thus, the women readers end up comparing themselves to their heroic idols. Ironically, males are only measured in the weighing scale of talent. One wonders if there is any heroism in the famous women characters popular in literature. If so, why does the author need to fill pages in the description of the female protagonist's divine beauty? Wolf points out that "a beautiful heroine is a contradiction in terms, since heroism is about individuality, interesting, and ever changing, while "beauty" is generic, boring, and inert" (59).

Another impression these endearing works intend to give is how beauty is rewarded while ugliness punished. Any woman whose ugliness is highlighted in a work is meant to be evil and destined to lose at the hands of fate. Though success never comes easy, yet in society, a plain-looking girl has to work harder to be successful. Women with ordinary appearances are supposed to adhere to the beauty norms either by way of makeup, cosmetic surgery or fashionable clothes. No wonder our fashion industry is booming in this age of madness.

Taking all this in view, one must say that Charlotte Bronte has done a commendable job in deviating from the established norm in her widely acclaimed novel *Jane Eyre*. She does not use a typical model of a heroine in the book. Jane is a rather plain-looking girl who lacks feminine beauty. A poor orphan, she lives with her aunt's family at Gateshead. From the very beginning, she is aware of her physical inferiority. Throughout her life, she meets people who remind her of this deficiency. She is left with no choice but

to be compared with highly beautiful women whom she comes across in life. However, this lack of beauty is proved to be a blessing in disguise for Jane who comes to realize her true worth and values in the course of her journey. Nonetheless, the number of trials she has to face is no less. Her period of trials begins at Gateshead where she has to face her three cousins far more physically superior to her - Eliza Reed, John Reed and Georgiana Reed. She is no match for their graceful personality. But Charlotte Bronte, with her thought provoking characterization, renders it clear that her other two cousins are no contenders with Jane for the title of heroine.

In fact, these apparently pretty women are highly flawed characters, a fact which society overlooks in lieu of their beauty. This points out to the fact how life is sometimes easier for the beautiful. Jane was treated unjustly for the most minor faults while these three could escape easily. This unfair treatment enraged Jane. Bronte sensitively brings out what tribulations Jane has to go through:

Eliza, who was head-strong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault.... I dared commit no fault: I strove to fulfil every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night. (Brontë 15)

People mistook Georgiana's beauty for her natural goodness. Even the servants treated her better. As for Jane, the servants believed, "if she [Jane] were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that" (Brontë 28).

Thus, Jane's qualities are sadly overshadowed by Georgiana's beauty. It again brings to light the fact how willingly the society tends to forgive beautiful people while the ugly receive an unjust treatment at the hands of society for no fault of theirs.

Jane thus lacks any hedonic power. This pushes her to explore herself further and reach a stage where physical appearance ceases to matter.

Jane has a hidden advantage over her beautiful counterparts - the power of choice. While the latter ones don't need to work

harder for a status, Jane has a free choice to select her path and develop her personality the way she likes. When Jane moves to Lowood institution, it is a welcome phase. She gets relief from the society's judgemental gaze. Jane gets a conducive environment for self growth here. Mr. Brocklehurst, the in-charge is a hard-core Christian. He does not support the frivolous ideal of feminine beauty. The pupils are supposed to dress plainly, without any self-adornment.

Miss Temple, a benevolent teacher at Lowood, also comes under Mr. Brocklehurst's jurisdiction. He wishes to take away all source of power from women. She has to quietly bear his orders, with "her mouth closed as if it would have required a sculptor's chisel to open it" (Brontë 63). Miss Temple is beautiful and kind but lacks power to defy what is wrong. Therefore, she cannot be Jane's contender as a heroine.

But Charlotte Bronte every now and then gives us a peep into her idea of beauty. For her, it means an inner flame in a person which must reflect through her personality.

Jane's friend Helen Burns is never mentioned as some exceptional beauty but there is enough evidence in the novel that Bronte presents Helen as a noteworthy character. He emphasizes the radiance of Helen's inner strength. Her preoccupation with spirituality refrains her from indulging herself in any kind of materialism. In a conversation with Miss Temple, as noticed by Jane, Helen's spirits rise, and she comes up as a woman of substance:

Woke, they kindled: first, they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek, which till this hour I had never seen but pale and bloodless; then they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple's – a beauty neither of fine colour nor long eyelash, nor pencilled brow, but of meaning, of movement, of radiance. (Brontë 73)

The true beauty exists in Helen's strong mindset and her dedication to a particular motto. Jane who herself has been judged harshly for her appearance holds the fine perspective to observe Helen's inner beauty.

Lowood teaches Jane to value the qualities she possesses. Talented as she is she trains herself in a number of areas. When Bessie, an old servant, meets Jane she notices the change in her personality and enquires about her talents. Jane tells her regarding her diverse abilities like playing the piano, painting and much more that she has learnt at Lowood and rightly wins Bessie's admiration.

Unfortunately, Jane confronts the same old issue at Thornfield Hall. She is yet again forced into a comparison with Blanche Ingram. Jane acts as a governess to Adele, Mr. Rochester's daughter. First of all, Adele, though still a child, acts like a narcissistic woman. She is truly gifted in her looks and loves to adorn herself in expensive dresses. However, Mr. Rochester does not always approve of her coquettish behaviour.

Jane eventually comes to know that Rochester has an apparently mad wife, Bertha, who once used to be extremely beautiful. Beauty was one of the prime reasons that lured Rochester into marrying the woman. However, he soon got tired of her mental illness and his ill-treatment turned Bertha into a mad woman in the attic. Her beauty failed to make Rochester stay with her.

Jane falls for Mr. Rochester. Another obstacle in their way is Blanche Ingram. Blanche, in terms of appearance, is everything that Jane is not. She is blessed with a tall stature. Her long curls catch many eyes. To top it all, she dresses herself in fashionable clothes. Her physical charms limit her need to act or improve herself as a human being. Her inner vices also offer a stark contrast to her attractive exterior. In fact, there is no harmony between her looks and nature. Her selfish acts are cancelled out by her angelic appearance. Blanche is another character which highlights Brontë's views on beauty. A weak personality can never be her idol.

Rochester chooses the plain-looking Jane over these pretty damsels. He knows in his heart that Jane's virtues far excel any woman clad in jewels. However, once he makes his choice, he takes on to convert Jane into his high ideal of a wife.

Jane's wishes are not taken into account. Rochester even becomes delusional when he calls Jane his "little sunny-faced girl with the dimpled cheek and rosy lips; the satin-smooth hazel hair, and the radiant hazel eyes." Jane corrects his mistake by explaining : "(I had green eyes, reader; but you must excuse the mistake: for him they were new-dyed, I suppose)" (Brontë 258).

In the obsession of turning Jane into what befits his wife, Rochester completely overlooks Jane's true personality and endearing qualities. It's hard to tell if he wants a wife or a slave for himself as he declares:

I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead, – which it will become: for nature, at least, has stamped her patent of nobility on this brow, Jane; and I will clasp

the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings. (Brontë 258)

Jane fails to recognize herself in the mirror at the wedding day. But Jane's strong personality is not something to be crushed so easily. She decides to walk away instead of living a life without any identity of her own.

From her initial days, Jane has been making peace with her lack of beauty but the finale of her learning comes at Marsh End. The process of her self-discovery culminates at Ferndean Manor. In the same trend as before, Jane comes face-to-face with another rival, Rosamond, seemingly perfect in beauty and personality. However, she fails to conduct herself as a mature woman. Saint John Rivers realizes that her childish behaviour will always hinder Rosamond from being a good wife. Thus, he goes for Jane whom he adores for her abilities. He even selfishly asserts that Jane is "formed for labour, not for love." (Brontë 402)

Thus, he expects something completely opposite from Jane now. But Jane knows she might be devoid of beauty but not of passion. The fire in her is not to be extinguished so easily. Jane finally comes to find a balance in her personality. Here culminates her long journey of self-discovery. She comes to accept the various dimensions of her personality.

Rochester and Saint John smell of the patriarchal attitude which tends to limit women using certain tags. Rochester, who himself cannot be called handsome, attempts to transform Jane into a stereotypical wife. Saint John also tries to limit Jane by completely rejecting her passionate side. The question arises here that what gives these men, who are themselves so flawed, the right to confine a woman's existence.

Thus, Jane emerges as a bold character breaking all stereotypes and deciding for herself her path of life. She returns to Rochester in the end for her own reasons. She still retains love for him. Now, after the unfortunate incident at Thornfield Hall, Rochester is no more in a condition to confine Jane. Her return to Rochester also depicts that one must never give up on love and hope merely in the name of revolt. Instead, all one needs is to speak for oneself and make efforts to change the situation for the better. Adrienne Rich is right in her observation that Jane Eyre is a "tale" about "soul-making" (462-63).

Jane and Rochester are ultimately united in the end. The latter no more bothers about the conventional ideal of feminine beauty. However, one thing which bewilders the readers is the isolated setting of the couple's house in the last chapter. In order to make peace with their lives, they still

need to stay away from the society's gaze. The scenario might have changed for these two individuals but the same doesn't hold true for the society. It indicates that the mindset in the context of feminine beauty has changed, if at all, only at a tiny scale. Nonetheless, the saying goes that even the smallest step in the right direction counts. Bronte seriously wanted the reader to reflect upon the emphasis that outward beauty has in society.

The groundbreaking success of *Jane Eyre* can be partly attributed to Bronte's unprecedented choice of heroine. Jane might not be the usual dazzling beauty but her charm comes from something more than skin-deep. She ultimately reaches the realization that beauty is no pre-requisite for being worthy. All it takes is some sincere self-analysis and a strong character to be a respectable personality. Jane turns her focus to what she possesses from what she lacks and refuses to succumb to society's pressure regarding outer beauty. She in fact becomes a role model for all the women in the world to value their abilities and believe in themselves, irrespective of their looks. The novel thus attempts to challenge the feminine mystique by breaking the stereotypes associated with it.

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